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BUSINESS CROATIAN LANGUAGE AND INTERACTIVE TEACHING AT THE VERN POLYTECHNIC

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Summary – *The most important findings in the field of educational psychology research indicate that students who take an active part in the teaching process tend to learn more than those students who are merely passive listeners. Interactive teaching transforms students into the agents of the teaching process, motivates them, changes their attitudes towards the teacher, develops their social skills as well as their interpersonal relationships, encourages them to make the best use of their personal experience in solving the tasks assigned by a teacher. In this way, students' previous knowledge can be related to what they are currently learning, which facilitates storing of the acquired knowledge into the long-term memory. This kind of teaching process makes all students involved, encourages them to co-operate and gives them immediate feedback on their success, and on the efficiency of their solutions and suggestions.*

Key words: *Business Croatian Language, interactive teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, first year students at the Entrepreneurship Economics College Vern (today called Vern Polytechnic) have attended the subject Business Croatian Language. The total amount of lessons per semester is 45, or 3 lessons per week. Two lessons are planned for lectures, and one lesson for practicing. Since various methods, techniques and forms of interactive teaching are applied (Grozđanić, Jurić, 2006), the two lessons of lectures can be called practice as well, because they make the students completely involved in the teaching process. (It should be noted that interactive teaching workshops have been organized for each lecturer at the Polytechnic.)

INTERACTIVE TEACHING

After the initial test has been written in order to gain an insight into the overall previous knowledge students have acquired, various exercises are designed to reduce the difference between what the students are expected to know and what they actually know. These exercises mainly cover the teaching content that students have not managed to acquire during their secondary education.

Well-designed exercises in a way also reduce the difference in the knowledge of Croatian Language within the group itself, which is comprised of 20 participants. (The initial test contains 30 multiple-choice questions with 4 possible answers, and the content being checked is spelling, grammar and business communication, following the secondary school syllabus.)

The teaching units deal with:

- **spelling** (small and capital letters; Croatian letters -č and -ć; -do and -đ; Croatian semi-diphthong -je; the spelling of words taken from other languages; hyphenation; punctuation; abbreviations);
- **business communication** (writing a business letter, a business offer, a letter of application, a letter of appeal, a letter of complaint, a curriculum vitae, a letter of invitation, etc.; presentation of a product, company, project etc.; making phone calls; writing advertisements). While doing the exercises students are taught how to use various resources independently (handbooks on spelling, grammar, business communication, language and dictionaries).

The most important findings in the field of educational psychology research indicate that students who take an active part in the teaching process tend to learn more than those students who are merely passive listeners (Anderson and Adams, 1992, West and Young, 1992, Rijavec, 2006). Interactive teaching transforms students into the agents of the teaching process, while the lecturer is a facilitator who guides and corrects them, directs them to various resources, teaches them how to study.

This kind of teaching approach has been outlined in the Bologna Declaration.

Interactive teaching involves all the participants in the teaching process and requires their interaction (student-teacher, student-student, and group-group). The student-teacher relationship in frontal or ex-cathedra teaching can cause detachment, so this kind of relationship is being changed, while simultaneously developing social skills and improving interpersonal relationships. It is important that the teaching process and its planning involve various teaching aids, equipment and the plan of using the space in classrooms in order to form work groups more easily (Rosandić, 2005). The report on the project *Active – efficient school*, after analysing the work of several schools in Croatia with the emphasis on active

learning, points out the improvement of the teacher-student relationship as well as encouraging positive traits in students. This has greatly contributed to positive changes in the school environment (Matijević et al., 2000.)

The advantage of this kind of teaching when compared to the frontal teaching is learning through personal experience. Students make decisions, solve problems, check, and draw conclusions. They get the immediate feedback which they can share with others, and which again gives them a sense of responsibility for their own, but also for their entire group's education (Meyers and Jones, 1993). They learn how to use various resources.

When students are given a problem by a teacher, they are expected to solve it by employing the previously acquired knowledge and skills. The teachers can then build on their knowledge, change it or upgrade it. It is important to point out the constant interaction between the previously acquired knowledge and the newly-acquired knowledge which applies to the existing one, which again enables successful storage of the acquired knowledge in long-term memory (Rijavec, 2006).

Interactive teaching encourages students to independent and life-long learning (Bonwell and Eison, 1991), as well as re-examining their own attitudes and values. (Rijavec, 2006)

Before lesson planning, a teacher should ask him/herself the following questions (Grozđanić, Jurić, 2006):

1. What do we want to accomplish – what is our AIM? (What will my students know, what will they be able to do after the teaching process?) What are the TASKS (How will certain teaching content be useful in that?)
2. Who are my students? What kind of previous knowledge have they already acquired? Are they motivated for learning?
3. How am I going to achieve the teaching aim?
4. How will I know whether I have succeeded?

Most experts place an emphasis on the following three questions:

1. What do my students already know about the topic which is the content of the teaching process?
2. How to direct the students? (Well-formulated questions are much better than offering the answers.)
3. When and how to motivate the students? How to choose the right moment for motivation? (Abrahamson, 2000)

If the teaching unit WRITING BUSINESS LETTERS is taken as an example, these should be the answers to the previously posed questions:

1. *What do we want to accomplish – what is our AIM? (What will my students know, what will they be able to do after the teaching process?)*
Here is the answer to this question:

We want to teach them to become skilled in writing business letters following the AIDA principle (AIDA – Attention, Interest, Demand, Action; Ashley, 1996, Naterop, Weis, Habermellner, 1997), but not following a given model with complicated office jargon. The letters should be written simply, concisely, logically, containing a clear message.

2. The answer to the second question (*Who are my students? What kind of previous knowledge have they already acquired?*) is:

Initial tests help us make a profile of our students. A short test written before this teaching unit reveals the difficulties students have in writing letters. It also shows their unfamiliarity with the types of business letters, as well as the AIDA principle, etc.

However, most of them will know that a business letter has to be clear, concise, and logical, without metaphors and without spelling and grammar mistakes.

3. Here is the answer to the third question (*How am I going to achieve the teaching aim?*):

In order to achieve the aims, we should employ the following procedures in the teaching process:

- **achieve the complete students' involvement**
 - **motivate them in the right way** (by explaining what can actually be achieved with a well-written business letter)
 - **set clear aims** (what will be learned and practised during today's lesson)
 - **organize group and pair work** (exchange of experience, learning from others)
 - **solve the existing problems** (write a business letter which will differ from other letters and which will spark interest and earn trust from the reader)
 - **analyse and assess** (have we achieved our aim, carried our message across, have we been clear, concise, logical; what have we gained?)
 - **draw conclusions** (a business letter is the mirror of the company – has it sparked the readers' interest or not? Why?)
4. The answer to the question *How will I know whether I have succeeded?* will be found in the final exam results, but also during the analysis and during the period when students are supposed to draw conclusions.
Therefore, even while planning a teaching unit, we should follow five steps which are conditioned by all factors of the teaching process (students, equipment, and classroom, teaching content):

- Step 1: **motivation** – when I learn this, I will be able to... (refers to a longer learning period)
- Step 2: **aim** – what you will learn and practise today, what your tasks are
- Step 3: **a short initial test** – what I already know about this, how much I can already do...
- Step 4: **research, work on the text** – how to work, study, do research, solve problems, which resources to use...
- Step 5: **a short check-up test** – how much I have learned, have I been successful? (Grozđanić, Jurić, 2006.)

Finally, here are some well-known and most frequently applied work techniques (Kleitzien, Vizek Vidović, Čota Bekavac, 2005):

- **exchange of ideas in a pair** (It is recommended with the students who have not got well acquainted with each other yet and who have not been familiar with the interactive teaching process. It is very similar to spontaneous comments on what the teacher has explained. For example, commenting the questions such as: in what way can you draw a business partner's attention with your letter; what puts you off while reading someone else's letter?)
- **exchange of ideas among groups** (A problem is first discussed within a group comprising several students, and then groups are faced with one another to exchange experience or confront their attitudes; for example, the analysis of various examples of well and badly written business letters).
- **a jigsaw** (Each student analyses a part of the teaching content and then reports on it to the class – teaching the class, actually, and in such way the entire teaching content is being covered; for example, each student analyses a different way of writing business letters.)

Note: before the work has started, time for task completion should be set, and the teacher should check if all students understands what they have to do (to set a clear aim) and how they are supposed to do it. The teacher has to supervise the working process constantly, warn the students about how much time they still have left, and monitor the participation of all the students within a group.

Interactive teaching requires a thorough preparation from a teacher: two tests for each teaching unit which has been covered (a short initial test and the check-up test); a clear concept of forming groups in the classroom; knowing the students very well; designing exercises which will involve all participants; practical examples (motivation); making resources easily available (Vizek Vidović, Rijavec, Vlahović Štetić, Miljković, 2003).

CONCLUSION – the characteristics of interactive teaching

1. Students are the agents of the teaching process. They are expected and trained to be completely involved in the teaching process, to solve problems, reveal, assess, analyse, use and share the existing experiences, as well as gain the new ones. They are given immediate feedback on how well they have worked, how successful they have been and what their results are. (This way of teaching requires small groups of maximum 20 students).

2. Motivation gives them an incentive to work, helps them to be ready and eager to acquire new knowledge, skills and concepts. It is generated by the activity itself.

3. The teacher is interested in his/her students, he/she knows how much they have been acquainted with the topic that will be taught, how much they can do, so accordingly, he/she can prepare methods, techniques and forms of work. The teacher organizes the working environment, sets clear aims, adjusts work of various groups and pairs; guides, directs, suggests, points out the mistakes, recommends bibliography. The teacher also provides feedback on the achieved results, the quality of work and mistakes.

4. Methods, techniques and forms of work are diverse, and are applied according to the abilities, previous knowledge and the skills that students have, and according to the topic being taught, or the task (problem) being solved. The choice of method or technique also depends on how well students know each other and how well and quickly they can adjust to one another, as well as to different situations.

5. The teaching aids are diverse: an overhead projector and transparencies with written summaries, a personal computer with LCD projector for presenting materials in *Power Point*, various materials from everyday life as well as the examples of well– and badly completed students' tasks (well– and badly written business letters), TV, a camera, and a lot of large sheets of paper on which groups and pairs make notes and later present them to others.

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